MITHILĀ—THE CULTURAL SEAT OF INDIA

BY

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Referred to as the cultural seat of India, Mithilā variously known as Videha or Tīrabhukti, is situated between the river Kausiki in the east to the Gandaki in the west and the Gangā in the south to the forest of the Himālaya in the north. It covered the whole of the erstwhile districts of Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, Saharsa, Purnea, north Monghyr, and north Bhagalpur, as well as the terai under Nepal lying between the districts and lower ranges of the Himālaya. The *Bhaviṣya-Purāṇa* attributes the origin of the city to 'Mithi', the son of Manu of Ayodhyā, while the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* identifies it with 'Māthava' the Videgha, after whose dynasty the country probably came to be known as 'Videha'.[1]

From c. 3000 B. C. to c. 600 B. C. Mithilā or Videha was ruled by an illustrious dynasty of Kings called the 'Janakas' with monarchical form of Government. The most famous among them was Kṛti Janaka, the Philosopher king of Mithilā, who was the most notable figure of his age A great patron of Philosophy and learning his court was thronged with the great philosophers of the age, e.g., Asvala, Jarat Karva, Yājñavalkya, Usali, Kahoda, Gārgi, Aruni, Uddālaka and others. Yājñavalkya, was the most illustrious among them. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* we have several references to the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and Janaka Vaideha (Kṛti Janaka) on Agnihotra.[2] We are further told that he carried away one thousand cows set apart by Kṛti Janaka for the most learned Brāhmaṇa.[3] He also taught Janaka the knowledge of soul after its release from the bond of flesh and worldly affection.[4] We also know that the kingdom of Mithilā or Videha carried on the pursuit of literature and Philosophy unmolested by any power for a long time and earned for itself a permanent place in the cultural history of India. It is hallowed by the memory of the visit of legendary heroes

1 For details, see Thakur, U., *History of Mithilā*, Chap. I.

2 *Sat. Brā.*, 11.6.2 (*SBE.* Vol. 44, p. 46).

3 *Bṛh. Up.*, 3, 1. 1-2.

4 *Cf.* also *Paṇini*, 3.3.105.

of sacred personality like Rāma, who was connected with it through marriage, and later on Krishna, who visited this place along with Bhima and Arjuna on his way from Indraprastha to Rajgir. However, the last of the Janakas, Karāla Janaka was a tyrant and was deposed by his people who established a republic in Mithilā.[5]

Upto 600 B. C. Mithilā passed through the vedic and post-Vedic developments of Indian civilization. Side by side the Vedic ritual of sacrifices, a deeper and more spiritual philosophy of the *Upaniṣads* had begun to develop denouncing the expensive sacrifices as "irreligious and foolish". Mithilā was the birth place of most of the *Upaniṣads*. The discussion about the true nature of self and its relationship with God was started by Yājñavalkya, "The great ancient Mithilā Philosopher", and his celebrated wife Gārgi. Besides, Yājñavalkya, there were other outstanding Maithila philosophers like Gautama, Kapila, Vibhandaka, Satananda; Ṛsya Sṛnga etc. Among the female philosophers of the time in Mithilā the names of Gārgi, Maitreyi and Vedavati stand out brilliantly. Most of the social rules and customs coming down through the ages were formulated and shaped during this period. Perhaps some of the *Smṛtis*, the ancient code of behaviour for the Hindus, were written in Mithilā during this period. We have evidence to show that at least the Yājñavalkya *Smṛti* was written then. Later in the *Epics* and *Purāṇas*, also, we find that Mithilā maintained her position as a centre of great culture and ancient learning.

In the time of the Buddha, Mithilā formed a federation of two republics, Videha and Vaiśālī. The two together were known as the Vajjis, and formed part of a larger confederacy including the republics of the Mallas, Sakyas etc.[6] But during this period, Maithilas with their great ancient tradition of scholarship and culture could not overlook the growing influence of Buddhism particularly, its hatred towards Vedic culture and varṇāśrama dharma, on her very border i.e., Magadha. The religio-literary quarrel continued for centuries and it resulted in the final defeat of the Buddhists at the hands of the great Maithila scholar Udayanācārya.[7]

With the fall of the republics resulting in the political domination of the Mauryas in the third century B. C. Mithilā ceased to be a sovereign

5 For details, see Thakur, U. *History of Mithilā*, Chap. I.

6 For details, see my *Economic History of Mithilā*, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 8-13.

7 For details, see Thakur, U., *Studies in Jainism and Buddhism in Mithilā*, Chap. II.

state and remained more or less a dependency ever since. The Mauryas, the Suṅgas, the Kuṣāṇas. the Guptas, the Vardhanas, the Pālas, and the Gurjaras etc. ruled over Mithilā from their respective headquarters till 1097 A. D.[8]

It was in 1097 A. D. that one adventurous young prince from Karṇāṭaka in the south, Nānyadeva by name, came to Mithilā and established a kingdom of his own here. The Karṇāṭa kings from Nānyadeva to Harisimhadeva ruled over Mithilā for more than two centuries and laid the foundations of greatness and glory which Mithilā enjoyed in this part of the country till about the 16th century. It was the age during which Āryāvarta was passing gradually into the hands of the Mohammadans. The Karṇāṭa kings with the help of the Maithila scholars and statesmen managed to keep the Mohammadans away and maintained their independence for more than a hundred years when the whole of Āryāvarta had succumbed to the Mohammadan power.

The rule of the Karṇāṭa dynasty was fruitful for the production of a large number of Sanskrit books mostly on *Smṛtis* and Grammar. It laid the foundations of a new social and cultural order. The Maithila court provided a refuge to a large number of Pandits and students who fled from the flames of foreign invasions that almost burnt up the neighbouring centres of learning and culture. It still functioned in perfect peace and harmony, with the result that Sanskrit studies in all its branches continued to be stimulated considerably[9]. Caṇḍeśvara Ṭhākura (or Ṭhakkura), was a Minister of State[10] of the last Karṇāṭa King Harisimhadeva. He was the renowned jurist of Mithilā, and wrote besides the famous *Rājanītiratnākara*, the Dharma or *Smṛti* digest; popularly known as *Ratnākara*, which is divided into seven sections, called ratnākaras—on Kṛtya, Dāna, Vyavahāra, Śuddhi, Pūjā, Vivāda and Gṛhastha.[11] Of these, the *Vivāda-ratnākara*[12] is, perhaps, the most important as it deals with law and has been the main authority in the Mithilā school of Hindus law for the past six centuries.[13]

8 For details, see my *Economic History of Mithilā*, Chap. II. Also *Cf.* Thakur, U. *History of Mithila*, Darbhanga, 1956.

9 For details, see Thakur, U , *Studies in Jainisn and Buddhism in Mithilā*, ch. II.

10 *Cf. Rājanītiratnākara*, ed. K. P. Jayaswal, Patna, 1924, p. i.

11 Thakur, U. Caṇḍeśvara and his Rājanitiratnākara, in *Visheshvaranand Indological Journal*, Vol. VII (1969), p. 2.

12 Ed. Dinanath Vidyalankara (Calcutta, 1887, *Bibliotheca Indica*).

13 See Jayaswal, Intro, to *RR. Ibid* , p. 'i'.

The age of Caṇḍeśvara was, in a sense, the age of great political crisis in the history of India. The advent of the Muslims on the political scene in the eleventh century brought, in its wake, besides the political upheavals, a menace in the form of a possible disintegration of Indian society. The Hindus were losing their political independence little by little and the strain on the cohesion of their society was fast reaching the breaking point. In the past, the Brāhmaṇa was in the forefront in saving the country from losing her identity whenever a cataclysm threatened, and once again he essayed to reinforce the tottering edifice as far as possible. But, by this time, he had lost control of politics and economics which were within his purview during earlier days. He had, how ever vārtā very much in his control. It was, therefore, natural for him, now, to have confined himself to preserving the social and domestic life of the people by suitably codifying the laws, regulations and rules of conduct in the various walks of life. "Their intrinsic merit and innate strength inspite of age old aberrations, and above all, their judicious application in harmonising an apparently uncompromising rigidity with an evergrowing adaptability to the times (as witnessed by the uninterrupted series of commentaries) have enabled these Smṛti works to preserve the individuality of the Hindu society and make it minister to a large mass of civilised humanity".[14] The claim of Hindu civilisation that it is eternal and continues to serve society, is nowhere better exemplified than in her smṛti literature.

The advent of the Muslims and infiltration of alien ways of life stimulated the production of digest-codes, and Mithilā, under the Karṇāṭas, produced several important works in this field of Sanskrit learning in thirteenth century.[15] The composition of Smṛti works during this period owes a great deal to the family of Caṇḍeśvara. His father Vireśvara was the author of the *Paddhati* (a manual of rituals for the chāndogya school); Mm. Gaṇeśvara, the third younger brother of Vireśvara, wrote *Āhnikoddhāra* (Vājasaneyī), *Chāndogyastrī-Kartka Śrāddha-Paddhati*, *Gaṅgābhakti-taraṅgiṇī* and *Gaṅgā-Pattalaka*, besides the well-known *Sugati-Sopāna*.[16] We learn from the Mithilā *Pañjī* that Vīreśvara's second brother Dhīreśvara wrote a *Mahāvārtti-*

14 Jayaswal, K. P. and Sastry, A. B., *A Descriptive Catalogue of Manuscripts in Mithilā*, Vol. I, Intro. pp. iii-iv.

15 For details see Thakur, U., *History of Mithilā*, chaps. V-VI.

16 *Cf.* Thakur, U., Caṇḍeśvara and his Rājanitiratnakara in *Visheshvaranand Indological Journal*, Vol. VII (1969), p. 6.

kanibandha but unfortunately no manuscript of .this work has come to light so far. Gaṇeśvara's son, Rāmadatta Ṭhākura, wrote the famous *Vājasaneyi-Vivāhādi-Paddhati* (*Daśa-Karma*) which is still the ruling authority in the Mithilā school. Another of his works, entitled *Soḍaśa-mahādāna-Paddhati* is also well-known. But, of all, the greatest in scholarship was Caṇḍeśvara whose contribution to Sanskrit learning in general and Smṛti literature in particular are unique.

The defeat of Harisimhadeva at the hands of Ghiasuddin Tughlak marked the end of the Karṇāṭa rule. After that a new line known as Oinavāra dynasty was set up by Firoz Tughlak in Mithilā.[17] But the significant fact to note, however, is that even the Muslim invasion did not altogether shatter the old Maithila devotion to the study and writing of Sanskrit books. The most outstanding name among the literary luminaries during the Oinivāra rule, are Jagaddhara, Vidyāpati, Sankara Mishra and Vācaspati Mishra etc. Among them the name of Vidyāpati has become a house-hold throughout the whole of Bihar and Bengal. He was a prolific writer and wrote books on *Smṛti*. *Niti* and rituals. His most outstanding work in Sanskrit is *Puruṣa parīkṣā*; *Kirti latā* and *Kirti patākā* are examples of his writings in Avahaṭṭha. He was the first among the prominent writers of Mithilā to have written in the local vernacular and to have made it a powerful medium of literary expression. Apart from contribution in purely literary fields, Mithilā during this period, made notable contributi ons in the fields of *Māmāṁsā* (disputations) and *Nyāya* (logic).

The end of the Oinavāra dynasty was followed by several years of faction and disturbance. Soon after Mm. Mahesha Ṭhākura became the recipient of a Farman from King Akbar with the gift of the land "From Kos (Kosi) to Gos (Gandaka) and from the Gaṅgā to the stone (Himālaya)". Mahesha Ṭhākura, thus founded the Khaṇḍavalā dynasty in Mithilā under the subordination of the Delhi Emperors. But in due course, they got full independence.[18] The house of the Khaṇḍavalās constitutes the great glory of Mithilā which championed the cause of learning and culture in this part of the country.

17 For details see, Thakur, U. *History of Mithilā*; Also, Chaudhary, R. K. *Muslim Rule in Tirhut*.

18 For details, see Thakur, U. *History of Mithilā* chap. VI, Darbhanga. 56. Also Chaudhary, R. K., *History of Muslim rule in Tirhut*, Varansi.

The rule of the Khaṇḍavalā dynasty was the golden age of Sanskrit learning in Mithilā. Like the Karṇāṭas and the Oinavāras[19], the scholar-Kings of this line generously patronised learning and art in their star-studded courts. Mm. Mahesha Ṭhākura, the founder of the dynasty was himself one of the brightest literary gems that illumined the period. Well versed in the art of archery and music, he was a scholar *par excellence* and is credited with having written a history of Akbar's reign in poetic Sanskrit. His other celebrated works are *ĀlokaPradīpa*, a commentary on Pakṣadhara Miśra's *Nyāyaloka*, *Dāyasāra*, *Tithitattva-Cintāmaṇi*, *Atīcārādinirṇaya* and *Darpaṇa*, a commentary on Gaṅgeśa upādhyāya's *Nyāya-Cintāmani.*[20] His greatest contribution to the cause of Sanskrit learning was, however, the establishment of the famous institution of *Dhautavastra-Parīkṣā* in Mithilā. It was a compulsory system of examination which the Paṇḍitas of Mithilā had to get through, to get due recognition of their euridite scholarship and learning at the royal court. Scholars coming from outside Mithilā also took part in the examinations to qualify themselves for the royal honour.

The family of Mahesha Ṭhākure was a family of celebrated scholars and Philosophers. The most remarkable literary feature of Lakṣmīśvara Simha's time was the regular conference of scholars every week in which celebrated scholars from different parts of the country participated and held disputations over various problems relating to different branches of Sanskrit learning. They were duly honoured and rewarded for their scholarship. His court, presented the brilliant spectacle of the erstwhile glory of the Mithilā University which attracted scholars from the remote corners of the country during the time of the great Karṇāṭas and the Oinavāras.[21] Besides scholars, his court also attracted celebrated musicians and wrestlers all over the country, and Hindu and Muslim artists were accorded equal treatment and honour. In order to promote Sanskrit learning he also established many Pāṭhaśālās and gave generous help and scholarship to meritorious students for higher studies in Benaras and other centres of Sanskrit learning.

Thus, we find that Mithilā has been a land dedicated to learning and culture from the Vedic times to the present day. It has been rightly observed that "Mithilā, a country with an ancient history, traditions of

19 U. Thakur, *History of Mithilā*, Chaps. V-VI.

20 *Cf.* Thakur, U.; "Sanskrit learning in Mithilā under the Khaṇḍavalā dynasty", in *JBRS*, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 91-92.

21 Thakur, U., *History of Mithilā*, pp. 375-82.

which it retains to the present day, is a land under the domination of a sept of Brāhmaṇas, extraordinarily devoted to the mint, anise and cummin of law. For centuries it has been a tract too proud to admit other nationalities to intercourse on equal terms, and has passed through conquest after conquest from the north, from the east and from the west without changing its ancestral peculiarities".[22] This Brāhmaṇical domination has left ineffaceable marks upon the culture of the rest of the population of India.

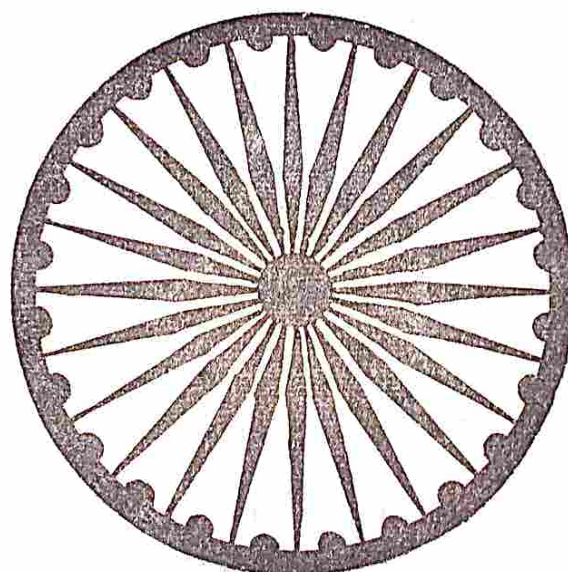
22 Grierson, G. A., *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. V, Pt. II, p. 4.

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